

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: **CREATING SPACE FOR CONVERSATION
IN POLICY AND PRACTICE: AWARD-
WINNING LITERACY TEACHERS
REHUMANIZING THEIR WORK
THROUGH DIALOGICAL PRAXIS**

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Scholars suggest current literacy policy potentially constrains teacher practice, deprofessionalizes and demoralizes teachers, and instantiates approaches to literacy that fail to recognize literacy as a socio-cultural practice. Although front-line workers possess valuable expertise, teaching is a feminized profession and society tends to devalue the work and knowledge of women, contributing to the silencing and devaluing of teacher voice. The present interview study (n=20; 10-29 years of experience; 16 female, 4 male; 18 White, 2 Black) foregrounds teacher knowledge to examine how award-winning secondary literacy teachers negotiate policy and practice to maintain a Self-Directed and Transformative Literacy Stance (Shelton and Altwerger, 2015). Teachers in the study are recognized as exemplars and spokespersons by being selected as Teachers of the Year by the agencies that create and enforce external mandates. The ideological disconnect between the literacy approaches of the teachers in the study and the approaches mandated

by the agencies recognizing them provides insight into the dehumanizing conditions of the profession and the strategies teachers can use to rehumanize their work.

Findings are consistent with previous research indicating that relationships with students and developing individual potential are significant sources of purpose and satisfaction in teaching. On the other hand, bureaucratization emphasizing efficiency, intensification of accountability, and standardization of curriculum and assessment directly inhibit relationships, leading to dehumanization of teachers and students. Interdisciplinary theories related to identity, critical literacy, and critical pedagogy provide insight into how teachers can create space for student and teacher agency, bringing external literacy mandates into conversation with diverse texts, professional communities, socio-cultural contexts, pedagogical expertise, and students' needs, identities, interests, and knowledge. Through lesson planning and teacher leadership, teachers engage in dialogical practice so that the external mandates are one of many voices guiding practice. The teachers are not rebels resisting mandates indiscriminately, but instead, approach mandates in critical, creative, responsive and expansive ways addressing expectations as well as moving beyond them to rehumanize their work. While findings suggest a need for systemic change, more important implications provide a frame for how teachers can rehumanize their work even as they begin to advocate for change.